

Interview #4

Informants: Dr. Belle Dale Poole, Bureau of Maternal and Child Health, California State Department of Public Health, Los Angeles.

Miss Gwendolyn Beckman, Bureau of Medical Social Services, California State Department of Public Health, L.A.

Place: Office of Dr. Poole, State Building, L.A.

Time: Friday, November 7, 1956, 10:00 - 12:00 a.m.

H.A.: My letter was very sketchy, so I'd best begin by filling you in on the background of what we propose to do. I'm from the Division of Public Health and Medical Care Administration at the University of California School of Public Health in Berkeley. Some time ago, those of us in the Division began meeting with persons from the Departments of Sociology, Economics, and Anthropology at the University to see if we couldn't hammer out a research design which would call mutually on our respective disciplines, and which would at the same time make a contribution to the solution of some practical problem. We began with these two points of departure, then: the methodological problem and the practical problem. Well, after some considerable discussion, we decided that we should investigate the health situation of a group which, so far as we knew, was perhaps less well studied than most others in the state -- namely, the migratory farm laborers. And, to give the matter an anthropological turn, we proposed to study the Spanish-speaking groups within the over-all farm labor population. That includes, as we saw it, Mexican-Americans, braceros, and so-called "wetbacks."

G.B.: Were you going to study just those who spoke only Spanish?

H.A.: Oh, ~~know~~. When I said "Spanish-speaking," perhaps I should have said, "those of Mexican extraction." Naturally, many of the Mexican-Americans will be bilingual.

B.D.P.: You're taking in an awful lot of territory with your three groups.

H.A.: That is a good point. We have thought about it among ourselves. We are continually alert to the possibility that we may be trying to do too much, and this is one of the things on which we would like suggestions particularly, at this point. How can we cut and trim our project so as to make it reasonable and manageable?

G.B.: Well, the braceros are taken care of before you begin. There's no problem there. They have medical and health services guaranteed.

H.A.: Heavens ! I've left out one of the most important things. I forgot to tell you what it is we hope to find out from these people. It comes down to two basic things: we want to find out what public health and medical care services are available to the people, and, secondly, we want to find out the extent to which they utilize the services which are available. And we also feel it important -- and we propose to do this at the very outset -- to place these health considerations within a framework of relevant factors. I have in mind such things as economic status, recreation, housing, literacy, legal considerations, and so forth.

B.D.P.: The group that we really need information about most is the "wetbacks," because we hardly know anything about them at present. But we would like to know.

H.A.: They are, of course, very intriguing. And we have some information from the year 1954 which indicates that there numbers in California were very great. But we have heard that the number has dwindled to next to nothing due to a drive by the Immigration people. Do you know anything about this?

B.D.P.: Oh, there are still plenty of them. There always have been. There always will be. I am speaking now of the Imperial Valley. What area did you say you were interested in studying?

H.A.: Well, ideally, we were thinking in terms of the entire state of California. But here again our thinking is very fluid. We fully recognize that for reasons of time and resources, we may have to restrict ourselves to a single area, such as the Imperial Valley.

B.D.P.: It's a way of life in Imperial County. You can't get rid of it down there. I don't care ~~xxx~~ what the Immigration authorities do. It's simply the accepted thing down there. Everybody knows about it. Why, I know a physician, Dr. Pierson. He's had a "wetback" working for him for twenty years. It's common knowledge. Nobody minds. You could take that fellow back across the border, and he'd be back next day. It's part of the system. Nobody's going to change that.

H.A.: A physician, you say?

B.D.P.: Yes. The fellow works for him as a yardboy. Has been with him for twenty years.

H.A.: Well, to tell you the truth, we were thinking very seriously about studying the "wetback" situation. But as you know, it is a difficult proposition.

G.B.: Why don't you go across into Mexicali?

H.A.: You think that while it may be difficult, it isn't impossible?

B.D.P.: If you really want to make a contribution, study the wetback. He's the one who gives us the illegitimate babies, the serious accidents, the typhoid, and tuberculosis... What we wouldn't give to have someone conduct the study you have been talking about. We would conduct it ourselves, but we don't have the time. It affects almost everything we are trying to do here.

H.A.: Well! Everything you say makes the problem more and more intriguing and challenging. I only hope we can get over some of the obstacles. Dr. Foster, the anthropologist on our advisory committee, proposed something in line with what you mentioned a moment ago, Miss Beckman. We all recognize that as long as we remain on this side of the border, we aren't going to be able to find out much. But Dr. Foster says that when the wetback returns to his home in Mexico, he is quite willing to talk about his experiences in the U.S. This brings up the question of where wetbacks come from in Mexico. And whether or not they return to their homes after they have completed their sojourn in this country.

B.D.P.: Well, we know that the population of Mexicali has gone up from 60,000 to 130,000 in the last few years. Who do you think all those extra people are?

H.A.: Probably wetbacks who have been deported and are just waiting to step back across the line.

G.B.: Or else people who have come up from the interior and are looking for jobs as braceros or wetbacks.

H.A.: So you think it is feasible to think in terms of conducting interviews in Mexico?

G.B.: It's very important to avoid giving the impression that this is something official. They mistrust anything connected with the government -- their own or ours. You would have to become one of the group before they would talk to you.

H.A.: We had anticipated that we would need to hire interviewers who were themselves of Mexican extraction. This may be something on which you can give us some advice. Do you think we will have any trouble finding qualified people?

B.D.P.: I don't think so. Depending on what you mean be "qualified."

G.B.: The problem isn't getting interviewers so much as getting people to talk with interviewers in the way you want. Mexicans aren't accustomed to our concept of group work, or the interview situation. It seems strange to them. It seems formal. They may want to cooperate, but -- Why don't you get in touch with the anthropologist in Mexico City? What's his name, Dr. Poole?

B.D.P.: Beltran. I'm not sure he'd be much help, though.

G.B.: I was just thinking he could help in finding interviewers. Students at the University, maybe...

H.A.: You are getting me quite excited about the "wetback" possibilities. But I would still like to consider the possibility, at least, of some of these other closely related groups.

G.B.: I think the braceros are on the way out. The growers are bringing in thousands of Japanese already, and it looks as though this program is going to expand. The Japanese are so...shall we say, tractable. As greater use is made of Japanese, there will be less need for the braceros. I wouldn't be surprised if the influx of wetbacks then became greater.

B.D.P.: I know for a fact that Dr. Russ has 500 of the Japanese contract workers in his jurisdiction right now. And I believe there are at least a thousand in Imperial County.

H.A.: There are a couple of questions I'd like to ask here. In the first place, it seems to me a little strange that the growers should be interested in the Japanese program, since economics weigh heavily with them, and the transportation costs all the way from Japan and back must be great -- much greater than from, say, Mexico and back.

B.D.P.: I believe there is some arrangement whereby the growers don't have to pay the cost of transporting the Japanese. Do you know about that, Gwen?

G.B.: I think that's right. I think there's a contractor involved.

B.D.P.: In any case, the cost is much less than we might think. They ship them steerage, and feed them very cheaply. Japanese standards are different from ours, you know.

H.A.: The other question I wanted to ask has to do with Miss Beckman's comment that she thinks the decline in the bracero program is going to mean an increase in the number of wetbacks.

G.B.: What I had in mind was: you have all these people in Mexico, poised at the border, and on farther down, who have heard wonderful stories about U.S. wages and so forth, and are looking forward to coming. If the way for them to come legally is cut off -- they are going to find a way.

B.D.P.: I believe that the agreement between the U.S. and Mexican governments was not renewed this year.

G.B.: I think that's right.

H.A.: Are either of you familiar with the "crossing card" system? It's different from the bracero contract program isn't it? Could you tell me something of its mechanics?

B.D.P.: It's used by people in places like Mexicali who want to shop on this side of the border, or work and go home every night. You can go and come as often as you wish.

H.A.: Could one come as far north as the San Joaquin Valley, say, and stay as long as, say, a couple of months.

G.B.: I believe so. It's rather like a visa.

B.D.P.: It's my impression, though, that you wouldn't find crossing cards used by stoop laborers. There are certain requirements. It may cost money to get one, or perhaps there is a literacy test.

H.A.: I see. Well, to get back to the "wetbacks." I would hate to have to admit that it's an impossible problem to study. Can you suggest methods that I might use, people I should see -- things like that?

B.D.P.: The trouble is, the people who know the most aren't going to talk to you. They aren't going to talk to anybody about it. I have a hunch, for example, that wetbacks are organized, in a sense. There is somebody in Mexicali and places like that who serves as a go-between between them and the growers. Now that would be the person to see.

H.A.: Ummmm. Yes. (Laughter.)

G.B.: Then, of course, there are the growers themselves.

B.D.P.: You have no idea how powerful the growers are. It's incredible. I can't even describe it. They are incredibly powerful. They have a direct line to Washington. Anything they want done, it will be done. They are a law unto themselves. Stats, "Red" Harrigan...

H.A.: Would they talk with me?

B.D.P.: They might talk to you, but they wouldn't tell you anything.

H.A.: I don't see why. What have they got to fear from me?
I have no axe to grind either for them or against them.

B.D.P.: It's just that they don't want to do anything that might upset the system. The system is running smoothly. They don't want to do anything that might possibly change it in any way.

H.A.: Suppose I were to approach them with the thought that what I was trying to do was actually for their own good in the long run -- it would provide them with a healthier labor force.

B.D.P.: No. They're happy the way things are. They're not worried about their labor force. For every man who gets sick, there are 20 waiting to replace him.

H.A.: The reason I keep harping on this is, you might say, a political reason. I can't afford to let them get the impression that I'm trying to sneak around behind their backs. I've got to let them know what I am doing, because sooner or later they would find out anyway. You know how the grape-vine works. So, as I see it, the best thing for me to do is simply to walk in and lay all my cards on the table -- tell them that I am going to do the work, and that I hope I can do it with their cooperation rather than without it.

B.D.P.: You can try it. There's no harm in trying.

H.A.: Can you suggest other people I should see?

B.D.P.: You should see the health officer, of course, and the welfare director. But, you see, they are appointed by the county Board of Supervisors, and the supervisors are all growers. I don't believe Imperial County has any civil service. So you will have difficulty talking with anyone working for the county. Why, some years ago, when Dr. Chauncey was the health officer down there, he was warned not to study wetbacks, or he would be fired.

H.A.: For Heaven's sake !

B.D.P.: I could tell you things that you wouldn't believe. A wetback can be bleeding to death, and they will cart him across the border in a taxi, but they won't do anything for him. I know for a fact that this has happened.

H.A.: Suppose a wetback was seriously injured in the fields and showed up at the county hospital. Would he be treated?

G.B.: No.

B.D.P.: How could they justify it to the supervisors?

G.B.: The only thing they will do -- if a "wet" Mexican mother in labor arrives at the county hospital, they will take care of her.

B.D.P.: Yes, and the minute she has her child, the Immigration people will come around and ship them back across the border. Even though the child is an American citizen.

H.A.: This is something that I am very much interested in. I have heard that this sort of thing went on, but only rumors.

B.D.P.: Oh, yes. And, mysteriously enough, the County Hospital will neglect to make out a birth certificate. Or else the Immigration people lose it in transit.

H.A.: You are in Maternal and Child Health work, are you not, Dr. Poole?

B.D.P.: Yes.

H.A.: Do you find that infant and maternal mortality are particularly high among the illegally entered group?

B.D.P.: We don't know for sure.

H.A.: Well, now, every time there is such a death, it is investigated, isn't it?

B.D.P.: An investigator goes out. But often he can't find the people. The only record we may have is the address the woman has given when she comes in for prenatal checkups. She may give an address in Calexico which turns out to be fictitious. Or, when we get there, we find the Immigration people have already shipped them back across the border. They hound them.

H.A.: Are there any private physicians in Imperial County you can recommend that I talk to?

G.B.: How about Dr. Brooks?

B.D.P.: No, I don't think he'd be much help.

G.B.: Dr. Zuniga?

B.D.P.: No. I'm trying to think. I don't believe any of them would really... well, really understand what it was you were trying to do.

H.A.: That's too bad. It's very important, I think, that I get to talk with physicians in the areas with large numbers of Mexican nationals.

G.B.: How about the doctor at the sanitorium down there?

B.D.P.: Yes, he would be the best. Dr. Adonis, at the t.b. san.

H.A.: Where is that located?

B.D.P.: In Holtville.

H.A.: Good. Now, how about newspapermen? They are frequently good sources of information? Any in the Imperial Valley you can recommend?

G.B.: No.

B.D.P.: No. I'm sorry, but I've got to run out to UCLA. I'd love to stay here and talk with you. Let us know if there is anything we can do, any time.

H.A.: Thank you very much, Dr. Poole. You've already been a great deal of help.

(Dr. Poole left at this point.)

H.A.: Can you tell me a bit about the Rosenberg Foundation project in Imperial County?

G.B.: Well, it, of course, was a service project, rather than a research project like yours.

H.A.: What was the name of the person...

G.B.: Frances McFeely.

H.A.: And where is she now?

G.B.: She's at the School of Social Work in Berkeley, getting her Master's. Her original background was in anthropology.

H.A.: Did they ever publish their findings?

G.B.: No, because the results were too fragmentary to be worth publishing. There were all sorts of problems. Miss McFeely had poor relations with the health officer. She's a very smart gal. Has a tremendous amount of drive. Perhaps too much for her own good. She was trying to do about three years' work in one, and naturally couldn't do it well.

H.A.: I'm sorry to hear all this.

G.B.: Something did come out of it all, though. The welfare department has followed up (State or County??? HPA) and now has two full-time persons doing the work Miss McFeely was doing.

H.A.: And you with the State Health Department? I assume you are engaged primarily in consultation at the local level.

G.B.: Yes, we're kind of orphans down here, but we do the best we can. We have to go up to Berkeley for all our staff conferences and so forth. We had to work out our own system down here for getting together once in a while and talking over what we are doing.

H.A.: For my own sake, I hope they don't close up the offices down here.

G.B.: Oh, they won't for a while yet!

H.A.: What Bureaus have outposts down here?

G.B.: MCH, tb, Nursing, Social Service, Crippled Children's Services, Food and Drug, Sanitation, Labs, Vector Control, Hospitals. Chronic Diseases has a special person working full time on the Tumor Registry.

H.A.: Health education?

G.B.: No health education, surprisingly enough. No nutrition. No lots of things.

H.A.: Well, Miss Beckman, I certainly appreciate your kindness. You shouldn't be so good to me -- I am going to pester you from now on!

G.B.: That's perfectly all right.

H.A.: You'll probably hear from me in a couple of weeks or so.

(Suggestions as to ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ resource persons were interspersed all throughout the above conversation..)